

OUTSIDE THE FENCE

Job skills keep ex-cons from returning to prison

Originally published June 29, 2008

<http://www.fredericknewspost.com/sections/business/display.htm?StoryID=76891>

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Without job skills and work, ex-offenders will most likely find themselves back "behind the fence."

That was the bottom line of two speakers at the Frederick County Chamber of Commerce's monthly Business Outlook program.

Gary D. Maynard, Secretary, Maryland Department of Public Safety and Correctional Services, and Yariela Kerr-Donovan, director of two education and occupation programs for Johns Hopkins Health System, were guest speakers for the event.

Maynard said it costs \$30,000 to \$40,000 a year to keep an offender in prison in Maryland. There are currently 24,000 in prisons in Maryland and his department has a budget of \$1.4 billion. He said 80 percent of inmates are locked up for drug addiction or sales of drugs or did a crime related to drugs.



Photo by Ed Waters, Jr.

"Eighty percent did not do well in school, came from dysfunctional families," Maynard said. Many also have mental problems. "Years ago the state decided to cut back on its mental hospitals, so we are the state's largest mental hospital," he said of the prison system.

Gary Maynard, left, Secretary, Maryland Department of Public Safety and Corrections, and Yariela Kerr-Donovan, Johns Hopkins Health System, were guest speakers for the Frederick County Chamber of Commerce's Business Outlook. Thanking them is Ric Adams, chamber president.

In the past, the state's education department ran training programs for offenders, but last year it was transferred to the Department of Labor, Licensing and Regulation. "That has brought skills training and job opportunities," Maynard said. "Maryland is the only state that does this so far, but I'm sure others will follow."

The secretary noted that 99 percent of offenders will go back into the community. "We try to reduce the number of victims by people under our supervision," he said.

One of the ways to do that, and keep offenders from returning to prison, is job skills. Under Maynard's direction, his department has created programs to get offenders into work situations where they realize the importance of doing a job.

"We planted 1 million trees in Maryland, including 150 at Antietam Battlefield. The National Park Service wanted an area to look the way it did in 1862, a forest, not a plowed field as it is now. The Park Service was paying \$200 for trees shipped from Tennessee. I talked with the director and said if he would buy the trees from Maryland's DNR (Department of Natural Resources) for 35 cents apiece, our inmates in Hagerstown would plant them," Maynard said.

The inmates not only planted and maintain the trees, they were shown the museum at Antietam and realized they were doing something for history.

"It is not about the trees, it is about people. They can see that the work they are doing is important," Maynard said.

In Sykesville, 15 inmates are caring for thoroughbred horses. "They are learning patience, consistency and animal care. Some of these inmates have a difficult time getting along with people, but they care for the animals and in time, may be better with people."

Inmates are also helping to maintain the five veteran's cemeteries in the state. "We use inmates who are veterans. They served their country, we owe them a debt, they could be buried in one of these cemeteries," Maynard said. "It makes a difference in their lives." A veteran of the Army National Guard, Maynard is a retired adjutant general of the Oklahoma Army and Air National Guard.

Kerr-Donovan spoke of various programs Johns Hopkins has for inmates, from opportunities available to preventative measures.

With the health care field as a "hot" jobs prospect, more skilled technicians and those in related fields are needed.

Working with the state's Attorney General's Office, Kerr-Donovan said the programs "help first or second offenders take a different track in life, a different fork in the road."

The Hopkins programs focus on Baltimore, where some 9,000 ex-offenders are returned to the community each year, she said. Without intervention, most of those would return to prison, she said.

Many of the programs involve certification, which means those completing the process can take that to other locations for a job.

One of the ideas that proved wrong for the program was its "stereotype" of the perfect participant. "We thought it would be someone around 30, a first offender, no violent crimes, but it proved to be wrong. Apparently it hadn't hit this group hard enough."

As it turned out, Kerr-Donovan said, the most promising participants were those near 50, who has spent some time "behind the fence," and realized they had to turn their lives around.

She said there was some uncertainty of bringing in inmates and ex-offenders to some of the programs. "They would be working with surgical instruments, scalpels. People were not sure this would be the right place to put an inmate. But we had plain clothes security and checked them before they left each training session."

Kerr-Donovan said when contemplating such a program, it must be sustainable. "Work with partners, established programs," she said. The Hopkins program, a pilot one for the nation, costs between \$8,000 and \$10,000 per participant.

"But you can't let cost deter a pilot program. You have to sustain it and can tweak to costs and other things later," she said.

Maynard said one alternative is the Private Industry Enhancement program. Companies set up a workplace inside a prison and inmates learn skills and make money.

"In a women's prison Holiday Inn set up a reservation center," Maynard said. "Out of those 600 women, I could tell which ones were working there because they took better care of themselves and had more self confidence. They made money and paid taxes." In another prison, inmates worked at a factory inside that made recreational vehicles. Maynard has served as director of correction systems in Iowa, South Carolina and Oklahoma.